



Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

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NOV 20 2007

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE Federal Communications Commission
Office of the Secretary
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING ON LOCALISM
WASHINGTON, DC

by
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October 31, 2007

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04-223

Good morning. I'm Wade Henderson, President and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse civil and human rights coalition, with nearly 200 member organizations working to build an America as good as its ideals. I'm also the Joseph Rauh Professor of Public Interest Law at the University of the District of Columbia.

I would like to thank Chairman Martin and Commissioners Copps, Adelstein, Tate, and McDowell for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights strongly believes in the value and power of the free market of ideas. We also believe that the health of our nation's democracy depends on the continued existence of a diversity of viewpoints in the public domain. But today, instead of local ownership with a diversity of views, we now have homogenized, cookie-cutter media divorced from local concerns.

We believe that every American should be concerned about the loss of the independent journalistic voices that have connected our nation, served our local communities, and provided

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the foundation for our democracy. If a company can buy a wide variety of media in the same community, it essentially provides one voice, not many. This means less diversity of viewpoints.

If racial and ethnic minorities, women, older Americans, and persons with disabilities, are not employed at news operations at all levels of management, there are few who can speak with authority about their condition in the community. This means less -- or less complete -- coverage of issues that are important to them --- issues like economic inclusion, the struggle for quality public education, immigration reform and hate crimes prevention. And if there isn't local integration in the management of local news operations, issues important to local communities can be ignored. This means the public interest isn't being served.

In June of this year, the Leadership Conference sponsored a web-based, national town hall meeting simultaneously in Washington, DC and Denver, CO on the importance of diversity in media ownership. The program was called "Why Media Diversity Matters." Video from our June event, which featured author, commentator, and talk show host Tavis Smiley; Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper; and FCC Commissioner Michael Copps, can be viewed at our website, www.civilrights.org; and we have brought DVD's of the event to submit to the Commission.

We believe that media diversity is a civil rights issue. And we felt it was important to highlight the issue for the nation because of what is really at stake: nothing less than equal opportunity in the public domain, and equal access to important local and national information and resources.

The unanimous conclusion of participants in our program was that, while these hearings are important, the FCC is doing an inadequate job of identifying and working to eliminate the barriers to participation of women and racial minorities in radio and television.

The 21st century is rapidly becoming the Age of Big Media. And as consolidation grows, localism suffers and diversity dwindles. Local ownership of broadcast outlets means better coverage for the communities they serve. Yet even in our nation's capital, it is difficult to find newspaper, television and radio content that accurately showcases the breadth and diversity of our unique version of the American experience.

This is not a coincidence. Research by Free Press, a well respected, independent voice on media matters, shows that Washington, DC media ownership is heavily concentrated, predominantly non-local, and doesn't reflect the diversity of its population. Two companies — News Corporation and NBC/GE together control over half of the television revenues in the Washington, DC market. Only two of the area's ten full-power commercial TV stations are locally owned and operated. Non-local owners control 63% of the District's 44 commercial radio stations.

Like Commissioner McDowell, I'm a Washington, DC native; and I can tell you that local news has not always been responsive, even to important local issues with national dimension. I remember when our nation's capital was a legally segregated city whether the interests of African Americans were largely ignored. In recent years, the issue of voting rights in Congress for District residents has, after much time and effort, finally moved from a peripheral concern to an issue deemed worthy of coverage by most local media outlets. Local media has recently given the issue a validity and prominence that helped engage the citizens of Washington, DC, as well as the national and international civil and human rights communities. But this is the rare exception, not the rule.

Local news does not address adequately the range of important issues that exist within the District—the acute lack of affordable housing, the growing rate of poverty within the shadow of

the Capitol and the challenge of economic inclusion, and immigration in the nation's capital are just a few examples of stories that aren't adequately covered. Watching or listening to the local news outlets in the District would lead one to believe that the only problems we face are the fate of the Redskins and challenge of increasing traffic gridlock.

We in the civil rights community care about media ownership because the way the public looks at issues – indeed, whether the public is even aware of issues like fair housing or voter discrimination, is directly related to the way these issues are covered by the media. The way the media covers issues is directly related to *who* the reporters and producers and anchors are—to who is actually employed by the media. Who is employed by the media is directly related to who *owns* the media. And who owns the media is directly related to policies that determine who gets a federal license to operate and who does not.

The battle over who controls the media is a battle that the civil rights community has fought for decades because we have long recognized the critical role the media plays in creating a more just and equitable society. We recognize that without the First Amendment, there would be no civil rights movement. The problems of negative or incomplete images in the media; the lack of diversity in the media industry; and the lack of coverage by media of the local communities they serve deserve real solutions--a real, credible licensing process where members of the community are able to have their voices heard during renewal process and which ensures there is more minority and female ownership that represents the people they are serving. Finally, I agree with the observations of those who believe that serving the public interest is inconsistent with the lifting of ownership caps.

Thank you for your consideration of these views.